

EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY PATRIARCHAL CREOLE SOCIETY: A STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF EDNA PONTELLIER IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

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ABSTRACT

The freedom of expression of one's own thoughts, feelings and preferences and establishing one's self as a self-defined individual seems to be a new American vocation. Expressive individualism, an essence of Americanism gives emphasis on the evolution of one's notices of self, quest for emotional contentment and the enjoyment as the ultimate goal of one's life. Edna Pontellier, as the embodiment of expressive individualism expresses her in-depth emotions and fights against societal and natural structures of motherhood by involving herself in extra-marital affairs, expressing artistic talents, relocating herself to the room of her own, and finally through giving herself entirely to the sea for forever. This paper studies Edna's struggles towards asserting her individualism and analyzes the extent to which she is able to achieve her selfhood in an insensitive patriarchal Creole society where woman is considered merely as a sex-object, child-bearer and commodity.

KEYWORDS: Child-Bearer, Commodity, Expressive Individualism, Motherhood, Patriarchal Society, Self-Defined, Sex Object & Suicide

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INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening* (1899), reflects the social and historical context of 1890s in which Edna Pontellier, the protagonist finds the strict traditions of Creole culture as oppressive and restrictive through the institution of marriage. In the patriarchal Creole society, a woman is not only demanded to discharge her responsibilities as a mother, but she is also expected to consider her motherhood as the ultimate vehicle for expressing her personal desires. Edna, a controversial character, fights against the "societal and natural structures" of motherhood that compel her to be identified by the tag of a wife or a mother instead of being a self-defined individual. She is a rebellious woman and resists and rebels against all those codes of conduct, set up by the patriarchal society to be followed by a woman, which inhibits the freedom of a woman to express her hidden and subdued desires openly. She is thus the embodiment of expressive individualism because she expresses her inner feelings and desires by involving herself in extra-marital affairs, expressing artistic talents through painting, abandoning her husband's house and finally through suicide by giving herself to the sea.

In American culture, the freedom of expression of one's thoughts, feelings and preferences is considered to be a powerful tool of an individual's liberty and freedom. People have developed greater awareness of one's own preferences and goals and consequently have developed greater ability to act on their own free will to achieve their higher goals. Self-expression, the assertion of one's individual traits, gives rise to a newer form of

individualism known as “Expressive individualism”, the term given by Robert Bellah, which gives emphasis to the involvement of one’s self, quest for emotional contentment, and the expression of one’s inner feelings. It focuses on the “enjoyment of life” as the ultimate goal of an individual. Heejung S. Kim and David K. Sherman define expressive individualism in their article titled “‘Express Yourself’: Culture and the Effect of Self-Expression on Choice” as:

As the value of freedom and individuality are core ideals that define individualist cultures, self-expression, defined as ‘assertion of one’s individual traits (Merriam-Webster dictionary),’ is strongly valued in these cultures. Consequently, one important aspect of individualism is called ‘Expressive Individualism’ (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) in which individuals express their inner thoughts and feelings in order to realize their individuality (1).

Expressive individualism argues that society should let the individuals to express their natural desires and inclinations to obtain true happiness.

The Creole society in which Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of the novel, lives is a patriarchal society, where a woman is defined as “someone’s daughter, someone’s wife, and someone’s mother, someone’s mistress” (Martin 1). In this society, a woman is viewed no more than an “investment” of her husband. As a wife, she is treated merely as a sex- object, nurturer and commodity, an object in the hands of others instead of a subject of her own fate. Eden T. Hade gives a vivid description of this Creole society in his thesis titled *Complicating Sex in Southern Society: Bridging Old Southern Values with the New Southern Belle*:

The Creole society in which Edna lives allows for this inversion of patriarchal dominance; the women are the managers of the households and hold a tight society while the men remain in the business world and out of the home. The men’s absence, however, presupposes women’s acceptance of their womanly and domestic duties and harmony within the home depends on maintaining this status quo (19-20).

In the Creole society of Edna, women were likely to be what Chopin termed “mother women”. “[The mother women] were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 14). In the Patriarchal Creole society womanhood is associated by motherhood which prefers child’s needs over the needs of the self. Womanhood means motherhood and motherhood means sacrifice to the extent that if she puts herself first, it is considered to be defiant and selfishness on her part.

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* is portrayed as the one of the most self-awakened mothers in literature. As a foreigner to the Creole society, she wants hysterically to be free, not only of her children, but also of any responsibility that the society places upon her. The beginning of Edna’s journey to self-awakening rests in her subsided childhood reminiscences, in instincts that enforce her to defeat the suffocating and confining forces that refuse her a much craved freedom. These reminiscences are triggered by her growing dissatisfaction towards her husband, who does not have any concern for her emotional and physical needs and considers her no more than the

caretaker of his house and children. Iraj Montashery in his article "Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' and the Exploration of Feminine Desire and Expression" analyses Edna's process of self-discovery as a "multi-layered process", consisting of certain stages through which she passes to achieve her aim of self-discovery (148). At the beginning, she is disrupted by the pulls of contrary forces between her desires to experience a free and liberal life and the desires which are associated with the realities of her present life. When she realizes the discrepancy between unpleasant patriarchal sensibilities and the pleasant life she yearns to awake to, she moves ahead and discards off her identity as an emblematic "mother woman", sets off to foster her desires and interests more freely.

To experience her new identity, Edna quits her husband's subjugation, detaches herself from all the responsibilities as a wife and mother and relocates to the new room of her own, which leads her to fulfill her desires of exploring herself sexually and artistically. Edna declares to Madame Ratignolle that she is ready to give up anything, even her life, but she will not sacrifice her identity for the sake of her children. "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin 72).

This attitude of Edna, who "perceives motherhood as an institution rather than as a relationship" is regarded as "unnatural and bizarre" (Arnauty 510). Children do not need facilities or money more than the love and care of their parents. They need to grow up being accorded with their parents. Edna's act of shifting to a new house leaving behind her dependent children is regarded as unnatural as she goes against the natural instincts of a mother, who is so devoted to her children that it becomes almost impossible for her to imagine a happy life without her children.

Edna, even as a child, had lived her life all within herself. "At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life- that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 22). The hidden rebellious instincts become her outward appearance when she, even being passionate for a famous tragedian of her time, marries Leonce Pontellier, because she finds the marriage more appealing due to the strong resistance from her father and her sister for Leonce's Catholicism. The "violent opposition" from her family, edges her on to marry him though she knows that the knot of marriage will end up all her "unrealistic fantasies" and lead her to a life away from any type of passion or excitement. She goes against the natural instinct of a woman who wants herself to be loved by her husband, but is not ready to surrender herself to the demands of her family.

Edna, unsatisfied with her marriage, sees the role of a traditional wife as "burdensome and disheartening". By unwillingly trying to adjust herself to an environment which is not of her taste, produces an indescribable oppression which fills her whole being with a kind of vague anguish. As a result, she has become rebellious and starts wrangling with her husband on all those issues which in any way come on her way to individualism. Nazrul analyzes the novel in terms of the rebellious nature of Edna's personality and says, "The novel reveals a "rebellious side of Edna Pontellier's personality that was never seen in the roles of the society's good, dutiful wives and mother" (10). Chopin presents an entirely different role of a woman which is neither that of an obedient daughter, dutiful wife nor that of a nurturing mother. She is the most rebellious when she, in a fit of dissatisfaction of her marriage, flings her wedding ring upon the carpet and attempts to crush it though it is not crushed due to her small boot heel. Edna's inability to crush the wedding ring, prophecies that it would not be easy for her to be liberated from the shackles of the patriarchal codes of conduct. But her fingers without wedding ring, renders her to paint, make drawings, and earn her living independently without any obstruction that impedes or is burdensome for her. Ali Khushnood gives even a deeper meaning to that incidence and says, "Edna's hand without her wedding ring not only strengthens her individual integrity but also symbolically dismantles the conventional belief that

she belongs to Leonce's possessions" (208). She has detached herself completely from the dominance of her husband by throwing away the wedding ring, a symbol of her marriage.

Edna values self-expressions as the highest goal of her life and prepares herself to go to any extent to achieve it. Heen Leif Atle analyses the idea of expressive individualism as the process of "leaving home" and making one-self free from reliance on others (6). Edna as the embodiment of the American's "ideas of self-development" leaves her husband's home to pursue her aspirations in a way which is entirely her own. Robert Bellah et.al convey through their book *Habits of Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* that "leaving home in a sense involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves". (65). In her new home, Edna begins to understand her position as an individual human being and most importantly as a woman in relation to the world within and about her.

In the Patriarchal society, man and woman differ from each other in the use of space. Women are confined to their homes and men are free to move from places to places for business. Thus, the mobility of women contracts while that of men's expands. Edna's shifting to a new house of her own, dissolves the difference in the use of space by men and women. Martin observes the pitiable condition of women, confined to the four walls of her husband's home and writes in his edited book *New Essays on The Awakening*, "The home is the centre and the circumference, the start and the finish, of most of our lives" (14). Edna detaches herself from this rigid patriarchal value, and after she has acknowledged her power in the immense sea, she starts hanging out at nights similar to what her husband does. When she is questioned by her husband about that new unexpected change in her behavior, she powerfully says, "Don't wait for me". She also exploits the power of her mobility when she goes to the sea to swim, "... that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (Chopin 42). The immense sea serves as the agent of her mobility, and her freedom over an unlimited space. Ann Heilmann in her essay "The Awakening and New Woman Fiction" analyzes Edna's swim as an emancipator which transforms her from an estranged wife to a self-governed individual completely in tune with her own instincts:

Edna's midnight swim is much more than a victory of physical coordination. It establishes her sense of self-ownership, physical, mental and spiritual, which in turn triggers two fundamental insights that determine her progression from disengaged wife to autonomous subject: in control of her body, she becomes aware of its potential for pleasure and learns to claim her right to self-determination (87).

After she has discarded the patriarchal norms for woman to be confined to the four walls of the room, she becomes assertive, does whatever she wants, realizes her power and loses the control of her husband.

As soon as Edna's awakening begins, the first step she has taken to actualize her sense of awakening is to resume her art of painting. She senses a "voice" in herself which she wants to articulate through the mode of painting. Art becomes an original tool to assert her individualism and to uncover her innermost personal being. Art is that essence of self-expression which comes in the form of spark of originality from the artist's soul. One who is an artist is free to use his talent in a way he/she likes. Oscar Wilde comes up with a new kind of relationship between art and individualism in his book titled *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, saying, "Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of individualism that the world has known...[it is] an assertion on the part of the artist that he selects his own subject, and treats it as he chooses" (29-33). Edna's rediscovery of her artistic potency initiates the process of her self-discovery as her artistic talent becomes a symbol of her freedom and she starts reading the things in artistic terms. When Mademoiselle Reisz asks Edna the reason behind her loving Robert, she explains

in the artistic terms, "Because his hair is brown and grows away from his temple; because he opens and shuts his eyes, and his nose is a little out of drawing" (Chopin 4). She starts noticing the intricacies in Robert from the artist's points of views and inclines towards him. She takes art as a way of self-expression and individualism. Edna's reformation in her personality can be understood when Chopin writes, "Edna spend an hour or two in looking over her own sketches. She could see their short comings and defects which were glaring in her eyes"(Chopin 82). She discovers the flaws in her own previous products of creativity and desires to reforms them to conform to her newly awakened self, demonstrates that her insight towards perceiving the things has also been modified similar to her character and soul. Edna's feminine desires expressed in her paintings are strong enough to overwhelm patriarchal culture's expectations concerning women's role in the society. As a painter she exercises her power over other characters in the novel and even orders her father, who has controlled her life to sit for a portrait still and stiff for hours to sketch him as she sees fit. Painting gives her the power to redefine people in agreeable to her sensibilities. Her artistic talent has become a revolutionary instrument to engrave her newly awakened passions and thus liberate hers from the roles associated with that of a wife or a mother. Her paintings help her to achieve her personal autonomy and give her self-sufficiency and self-confidence which she yearns for.

Edna breaks patriarchal codes attached with sexuality and follows her own sexual desires which are strictly prohibited for Creole women. Edna's fascination first for Robert and then for Arobin Alc  e crushes the patriarchal code according to which "good woman is expected to find sex frightening and disgusting" (Tyson 89). Edna feels that her lonely artistic life- style is incomplete without sexuality. She does not approve Madmoiselle Reiz's artistic life- style devoid of sex. Papke in his book *Verging on the Abyss* analyses that for Edna "to be a mother-woman is to abjure self for the sake of others, to be an artist woman is to live celibate, to give all one's love to expression" (82). So, she hankers for a more physical relationship through which she hopes to find the individuality which she aspires for. Daniel Yankelovich in his article "How American Individualism is Evolving" writes on treatment of sexuality in expressive individualism as, "We continue to regard sexuality as an inherent good to be expressed openly rather than an urge to be suppressed puritanically. People are becoming more prudent about sexuality, but the change in attitude is firmly entrenched" (5). Contrary it this belief, Edna takes sexuality as an innate virtue which should be expressed openly rather as an instinct to be suppressed secretly. Edna, guided by her sexual desires, resists and rejects all the notions associated with mothering. In an attempt to do so, as is analyzed by Castellano in her master's thesis titled "Representation of Female Sexual Desire in Four Novels by Women from the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Century", "Edna's personal development and sexuality allow her to challenge the boundaries of female propriety and to move towards self-autonomy and self-fulfillment"(Castellano 62). She involves herself in a physical relationship with Arobin Alc  e to assert her sexual individualism in a society where infidelity by a woman is beyond imagination. But unfortunately this relationship turns out to a devastating step in her life. Lynda in her article "Romantic Overtunes" raises a point that Edna's relationship with Alc  e is the beginning of her unexpected sufferings, which she meets in the form of her alienation and finally suicide. Lynda S. Boren says that "it is only after Edna's affair with Alc  e that she awakens into the troubled realization that she has somehow been untrue to her other self, that inner spiritual self whose desires remains unfulfilled" (152). She has been unfaithful to Robert with whom she dreams of a perfect and idealistic relationship. She says "I love you, only you; only you; no one but you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long stupid dream". And now, she is trying to venture out solitarily to seize her dream of idealistic love. She has deceived the integrity of her own soul by indulging herself in a relationship which is entirely physical without any tinge of emotions. Her dream of unfulfilled love cannot be fulfilled without Robert whom she loves. Her act of infidelity with Arobin is a death blow to all those cherished desires which she hopes to be fulfilled with Robert.

The next device which Edna adopts to assert her individualism is that of acting as a man. After she has immersed herself in the “abysses of solitude”, she develops a kind of thirst to transcend the conventions that have refrained themselves in introversion. She yearns to understand herself as an individual, to lead her life according to her own whims and beliefs. She aspires for emancipation from a world that curbs a woman’s right to survive as a man’s counterpart rather than as a possession in man’s hands similar to other materialistic possession he has. Elizabeth A. Johnson quotes poet Adrienne Rich’s definition of patriarchy in her book *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* as:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male (quoted Johnson 20).

Patriarchal society makes a distinction between the roles of males and females to continue the male’s influence in the society. Edna crushes this ideology of males and revolts against it by showing some manly acts which are in contradiction to what she should do as a woman in the Creole society. She observes that the “men are allowed to live lives of sexual fulfillment, while not being expected to bear or care for their children, and develop a personality and individual self through participation in the business world” (Kapton 1). She feels that masculine freedom for the first time, when Leonce goes to New York for a business purpose and both of her sons to Iberville to spend time with their grandmother. “a radiant peace settled upon her when she at last found herself alone. Even the children were gone”(Chopin 109) Now, she is alone with radiant peace, surveys the house as if new to her and reads Ralph Waldo Emerson, a transcendental writer before going to bed. She walks alone in the street of New Orleans, the right given only to men; she flirts with Arobin Alcée the most “scandalous and promiscuous” man in the society; she hosts exorbitant and sensuous parties with males without her husband’s consent.

The period during which the novel was published was marked as a watershed in the history of female writings. The concepts such as “Cult of Domesticity” and “True Womanhood” were criticized and the concept of “New Woman” was propagated by the female writers of that age. The term “new woman” was given by the British Feminist Sarah Grand who described “new woman” as a woman who searches for accomplishment and self-fulfillment beyond the institution of marriage and family. “New woman” is discontented with conventional life style in which she is to be the caretaker, not the owner of her husband’s house. This patriarchal mindset becomes the hindrance for Edna who desires to assert her selfhood outside the institution of marriage and wife’s and mother’s domestic duties. Ali Khushnood relates Edna to the “new woman” in his article “To Conform or Not to Conform: Conflict of Motherhood in Kate Chopin’s Selected Fiction”:

Edna Pontellier is an embodiment of the ‘New Woman’ who shows that women’s sexual desires are not confined to motherhood and procreation but rather she invalidates the Victorian social mores and supports the idea of joyful female sexuality even out of wedlock (208).

Edna as a new woman, asserts social, financial, sexual and spiritual independence from her

Husband: “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself

Where I choose” (Chopin 160). She questions the prohibitive views on a woman and revolts against the society and its views that restrict the role of a woman to that of a wife and a mother. She tries to understand her role as an individual and searches pleasures outside the domain which is ruled by men who could be her father or husband. But, she is

disillusioned when she senses indifferent attitude even of Robert Lebron's, towards her with whom she dreams her awakened life. Robert's sudden departure from her life makes her surprisingly lonely and steals the brightness, the color and the meaning out of her life leaving her life dull and faded. As Chopin writes, "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything. The conditions of her life were in no way changed, but her whole existence was dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing" (Chopin 70). This patriarchal behavior of Robert leave her so hurt and depressed that the next day, she goes to her favorite ocean, cast off all her clothes, enter into the water, goes farther and farther till she is seen no more.

CONCLUSIONS

Kate Chopin creates a bizarre "New Woman" in the form of Edna whose struggles towards asserting her individualism in heedless patriarchal society proves to be partially productive and partially unproductive. Though she blatantly disregards stringently enforced Creole societal expectations and lives her life according to her own whims and wishes, she is not able to change the rigid mind sets of the patriarchal Creole Society. She is captured in a world in which she is neither welcomed as she wants to be, nor is she ready to adapt to what society wants her to be. She comes to realize that her newly awakened identity is misfit into patriarchal society and she cannot remould herself to fit into the mould created by the society for her. She also realizes that the masculine traits which she employs to meet her aspirations of free will are frowned upon by the brusque patriarchal society. Her suicide is the final liberation from the thralldom of a society, which is hesitant to welcome a woman who is entirely in accord with her own instinctive nature. Ending herself is her ultimate declaration of her self-ownership to the senseless patriarchal society. Though she achieved victory in achieving selfhood, she is not able to retain it and is swayed away with a little jerk of self-created alienation which pushes her towards that only option left with her, which is giving herself entirely to the sea for forever. Her narcissism is the primary obstacle in the way to her awakening as her rebellion insinuates to be inspired more by the self-centered desires to meet her aspirations and preferences than to struggle for a common motive larger than herself. It can be stated that being individual-being one's own- does not encompass withdrawing oneself from the responsibilities which one owes towards others. The true individualism does not mean renouncing one's social nature but in meeting its requirements in a way as to subsidize to the broader fellowship of life.

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